

AN EXPLORATION OF ISRAEL EDUCATION IN URJ SUMMER CAMPS

By

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RHEA HIRSCH SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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Approved By:

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Reuven S. Aron", written over a horizontal line.

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SUBMISSION AND RECEIPT OF COMPLETED CAPSTONE PROJECT

I, Hannah Rubin-Schlansky, hereby submit two copies of

my completed capstone project in final form, entitled:

An Exploration of Israel Education in URJ Summer Camps

4/16/2012
Date

Hannah Rubin-Schlansky
Student Signature

RECEIPT BY SCHOOL OF JEWISH NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT
AND BY THE RHEA HIRSCH SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

The above named project was received on

4-16-12

Date

Rebecca J. Hays
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Abstract

Jewish summer camps are known to be places that cultivate and strengthen Jewish identity. This study examines how Israel Education is integrated into the curriculum of Jewish summer camps. In order to explore the role of Israel in Jewish summer camps, I interviewed six of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) summer camps. I asked each of them a series of questions probing their camps' curricular development and how they implement Israel Education throughout the summer. Through my research, I found that all of the camps integrate Israel into their curricula in some way. I found that some camps segregate Israel into its own learning activity, and others integrate pieces of Israel Education into many daily activities. It became clear through these interviews, that there is no overarching structure of how to teach Israel in the URJ camps and thus, it is difficult to gauge success. If camps are going to be the successes that we hope they will be, they need to do a better job using the strengths of summer camps to better educate the future generations of Jewish youth about Israel and help them uncover their own relationships with Israel. Jewish identity cannot fully exist without Israel identity and this capstone provides some suggested best practices.

As Reform Jewish teens struggle to assimilate into the larger American mainstream, religious identity often gets pushed to the periphery. Jewish summer camps provide these same teens an opportunity to live for two weeks, four weeks, and often longer, in a community that sparks a connection to Judaism in a spiritually magical way. The mission of camping is accomplished in a setting removed from the pressures of home, and away from the pressures of assimilation, of “fitting in,” thus allowing children to experience distance from their parents and perhaps more secular peers. Camp provides an opportunity for Jewish teens to mature under the umbrella of Jewish values, enabling them to “grow up Jewish.”

Jewish summer camps, which were initially established as places to “Americanize” Jewish children emigrating from Eastern Europe, also had the tangential benefits of protecting them from urban diseases like polio, and offering “young people a chance to experience an immersion in a Jewish environment” (Lorge & Zola, p. 17). These practical benefits aside, camps were also established by “rabbis and lay leaders who believed that camping was an effective vehicle to provide Jewish educational enrichment and spiritual enhancement” (Lorge & Zola, p. 13).

The Reform Jewish summer camp is dedicated to promoting the exploration of one’s Jewish identity. One of the reasons campers are able to form and strengthen their Jewish identities is that they are doing it alone, on their own terms, away from the pressures of their families. In addition to the cultivation of campers’ Jewish identities, camps were mindfully created to encourage campers’ future involvement in the Reform Jewish community as a whole. Because of my camp experience from a very early age, I have

decided to make it my career and am passionate about working in the field of Jewish education.

According to the newly revised mission statement of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), which is followed by all the URJ camps, “The mission of the URJ Camping System is to enrich and transform lives by strengthening Jewish identity, teaching Jewish knowledge, instilling Jewish values and cultivating lifelong friendships within a vibrant and fun community of living Reform Judaism” (www.urj.org/about). Israel Education, integrated into a camp curriculum, is a critical way to achieve the goals in this mission statement.

Literature review

There are several pieces of literature in the field that discuss the impact of Jewish summer camp on the youth of today. Many of them focus on general aspects of camp, but there are very few resources that focus on specifically Israel Education as a part of the curriculum. I hope that this research fills in some of these gaps and introduces a new lens through which to view the impact of Jewish summer camp.

The AVI CHAI Foundation is a private foundation “committed to the perpetuation of the Jewish people, Judaism, and the centrality of the State of Israel to the Jewish people” (AVI CHAI Foundation, n.d.). Before committing to investing in summer camps, the AVI CHAI Foundation asked Amy Sales and Leonard Saxe to research Jewish summer camps and report on the pros and cons, successes and failures. Theirs were some of the many articles and books that refer to the concept of “camp magic.” As they explained, “Camps seem to work ‘magic’—captivating children’s imaginations, building strong camp memories, and easily winning lifelong devotees” (Sales & Saxe, p. 3). Sales’ and Saxe’s analysis of Jewish summer camps around the country was well researched and covered a

large variety of camps. It focused on different types of Jewish camps, from different parts of the country, with different populations, and at different costs. Sales and Saxe divided their findings into aspects of camp life such as services, keeping kosher, *Shabbat*, Hebrew, counselors, camp directors, and more. Each of these sections had excellent examples and explained in detail what makes “camp magic,” how “Judaism is lived at camp,” and provided recommendations that would make a camp truly successful and retain campers and staff members. For example, camps should “provide the training and support counselors need to advance on their personal Jewish journeys and to flourish in their work as Jewish role models” (Sales & Saxe, 2002, p. 24). The only things missing from this study were direct quotes, stories, and memories from children and adults who have gone through the Jewish camping system.

Steven Cohen and Laurence Kotler-Berkowitz conducted a 2004 study entitled *The Impact of Childhood Jewish Education on Adults' Jewish Identity: Schooling, Israel Travel, Camping, and Youth Groups*. They looked at the impact of both formal and informal Jewish education experiences on adults, and they investigated whether or not these experiences helped to form their Jewish identities. Included in their report were statistics from the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS). Their study divided participants' information on Jewish education into three categories: campers at a Jewish summer camp, high school participation in a Jewish youth group, and 14-26 year olds traveling to Israel. They took into account the fact that things have changed over the years, especially in terms of travel to Israel, which did not become very popular until after 1967. Based on these variations over the years, they narrowed their analysis to younger adults who shared their experiences in a similar time frame. They discovered that, “former campers are three times

as likely as non-campers to report feeling very attached to Israel (41% vs. 14%)... childhood Jewish education is linked to higher levels of Jewish identity in the adult years" (Cohen & Kotler-Berkowitz, 2004, p. 6).

They also took into account other factors, linked to the three mentioned above, that may have contributed to the formation of Jewish identities, such as how often the family lit Shabbat candles or how many Jewish friends the respondent had in high school. In fact, they used a statistical analysis called "Multiple Classification Analysis" to factor out the extra influences, such as home life, in order to discover the impact of Jewish education itself. Kotler-Berkowitz and Cohen (2004) concluded, "Day schools, attending supplementary schools for seven years or more, and Israel travel exert the largest, consistent measures of influence. Jewish camping and youth group exert more modest but across-the-board effects" (p. 17).

Because of the findings listed above, camps were the focus of my research. A problematic issue with this study, however, is that the categories of informal education covered a broad range of ages. Nine-year-old campers will take away different experiences from summer camp than 25 year-olds who go to Israel. Both motivations for the two experiences were different and their mindsets were very different. Therefore, the data might have been skewed if the ages of the respondents was so wide ranging.

For many Jewish children and adolescents, summers at a Reform Jewish summer camp are a life changing experience. For more than 60 years, twelve Reform Jewish overnight camps have worked to transform the lives of about 10,000 campers and 1,500 staff members every summer (Lisa David, personal communication September 17, 2011). Based on the hope that Jewish camping could positively impact the lives of Jewish youth

positively, the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) camps have served a diverse population of Jewish children. It is the purpose of this paper to analyze six different URJ Camps and explore their different Israel Education programs.

Methodology

My own camp experience was incredibly positive and transformational for me as a Jew. However, when I studied abroad in Beersheva during college, I realized there was much I did not know about Israel. I wanted to investigate other URJ camps and analyze their Israel Education curricula in order to see what their campers were learning about Israel every summer.

When I began my research about Israel Education in URJ summer camps, I decided to collect my data through interviews and focus on six URJ camps located in different parts of the United States. I tried to interview at least two professionals from each camp, preferably the Camp Director (CD), Assistant/Associate Director (AD), and/or the Education Director (ED). Because of interviewee time and availability constraints, some interviews were conducted through e-mail. I interviewed eight staff members from six different URJ camps. In order to protect the privacy of these six camps, I have named them Camp A-Camp F.

Through this research, I explored and analyzed how URJ camps in the United States teach and implement Israel Education. I also looked at what is missing in these programs and how Israel education programs can be improved. It was my intention that through this research, I would be able to identify what is missing in these camps' Israel education programs and make suggestions that would contribute to the creation and implementation

of appropriate programs and procedures. Below is a list of the interview questions. None of the camps answered all of the questions.

Interview Questions

1. What is the role of education in the camp experience?
2. What are some specific areas you look to emphasize? What are topics you try and work in every year?
3. Is Israel Education an important part of your camp? If so, why? If not, why not?
4. Is Israel education incorporated into the curriculum of your camp? If so, how?
5. What is the focus of the curriculum?
6. What is the content of this curriculum?
7. What does the implementation look like?
8. Is Israel Education in your camp successful? If so, how do you know? How do you measure your success? What does success look like? If no, how do you think it could be more successful?
9. How many hours are spent on Israel at camp?
10. What is the relationship like between the *mishlach* (Israeli staff) and the American staff?
11. How did you decide when to do Israel Education at first?
12. What did it look like then? How has it changed? Where do you think it's going?

Analysis and Findings

Everyone contacted at these six different camps was very open to discussing their camps and how they have implemented Israel education into their daily programs and

educational activities. As each particular question conveys a different element of my findings, I have broken this section into three parts, paying special attention to the questions all the camps answered. Education is central to the missions of these camps and they try to implement it in all aspects of camp life. Whether it is using Jewish values on the soccer field, enforcing teamwork on the Alpine Tower, or having a separate time during the day for *limmud* (learning session), education is important for all the camps.

However, I am not convinced that just because Jewish education is in the mission of each of these camps, it is fully implemented and relayed to the campers in the way they would like. Although the camp setting is one in which experiential education can thrive, there is still the need for a clear written curriculum to guide program implementation throughout the summer. Each program designed under the umbrella of “Israel Education” needs to have clear goals and vision behind it. The following paragraphs contain the camps’ responses from many of the questions listed above.

“How is Israel Education implemented in your camp?”

There were varying responses to this question. Camp A said that Israel Education was important to camp in different ways in different years. According to the AD, hiring *Mishlachot* is the best way to teach Israel because it makes Israel come alive for the campers. One other part of their program, which no other camp I interviewed has implemented, is to bring members of the *Mishlachot* to the community a few days early so the Israelis can spend a Shabbat with camp families. This not only gives the families an opportunity to get to know an Israeli one-on-one, but it gives the Israeli staff member the opportunity to learn more about American life and what a Reform Jewish Shabbat at home looks like (Anonymous, personal communication, September 15, 2011). This is a creative

way to integrate members of the *Mishlach* into the camp community before camp starts and provides an experience of American family life for a short period of time.

The AD of Camp B told me that each unit has a few Israel Education programs during *limmud* sessions. The focus of these curricula is different depending on the age group. The *Mishlach* runs Israel programs for each unit and there are other aspects of camp life that relate to Israel such as Hebrew words on posters and facts about Israel the daily newsletter. The younger campers make falafel and pita and learn *Hatikva* and Hebrew words about different cities, food, etc. The older campers learn about Israel's history, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and explore their personal relationships with Israel. In addition, the tenth graders study different aspects of Israel for their *limmud* sessions during the summer. The goal of these activities is to prepare the tenth graders for going to Israel the following summer and heighten their excitement about the upcoming trip. The Assistant Director said, "Our job at camp is to whet their appetite and make them want to go [to Israel]" (Anonymous, personal communication, October 24, 2011).

The Director of Camp C also thought that Israel Education at their camp was important. The director said that the big message they want to relay about Israel is that "as Jews each of us should have a relationship with the land and people of Israel that is as important and complicated as our relationship with our own family." The director continued, "Our spin, though, is a little different than many other Jewish camps—I believe. Since most of our campers come from small Jewish communities in the Bible Belt, being in the camp setting is a chance to live in a Jewish place on Jewish time. By extension, Israel is presented as another place where that can happen. In essence, our commitment to

strengthening Jewish identity is played in presenting Israel as a place, like camp, that you can live on Jewish time” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 4, 2011).

The Director also said that for older campers, there is more intense Israel Education than for the younger campers. They focus on what it’s like to be a teen and young adult living in Israel. In addition, for the staff at Camp C, there is some Israel programming as a way to counter-program the negative messaging they get on their college campuses (Anonymous, personal communication, December 4, 2011). This was one of the only camps that also mentioned Israel Education for the staff, in addition to that of the campers.

I interviewed both the Education Director and the Director of Camp D. Both of them were very confident in their Israel Education programs. The director’s first response to this question was, “Israel represents the locus which is the centrality of the Jewish people and the fulfillment of Jewish history in terms of yearning and sacred space.” The camp brings Israel into camp life in three very specific ways. The director explained, that there are members of the *Mishlach* in every unit, there is a *Merkaz Ivrit* (Hebrew Center) and the staff and faculty try to embed Israel into the daily curriculum of camp (Anonymous, personal communication, October 21, 2011). The Education Director explained that the curriculum is driven by the faculty, who are at camp for a minimum of two weeks during the summer. They work with the camp staff to help implement these programs on a day-to-day basis. Each unit has an hour of *Ivrit* (Hebrew) in addition to an hour of *limmud* each day. The goal of this camp is to make it clear that Israel is a part of Jewish identity (Anonymous, personal communication, September 14, 2011).

I interviewed both the Associate Director and the Education Director from

Camp E. Unlike Camp D, they had differing opinions about their Israel Education curriculum and programs. The Associate Director spoke more about the challenges of Israel Education and what Camp E is trying to do to make it successful in the future. "There are so many conflicting views on how to present it. It is a hard question how to move away from a clichéd *Yom Yisrael* (Israel Day), because it's not what Israel is anymore. It is ever evolving" (Anonymous, personal communication, October 21, 2011). The Education Director spoke more about the realities of the curriculum, including the current issues surrounding it. The ED's first response to my question of "Is Israel Education an important part of your camp" was "no, but it should be" (Anonymous, personal communication, October 13, 2011). According to the ED, there was a lot of built up tension in camp and there are years of frustration and difficulty with the *Mishlachot*. Because of this tension, a negative tone was set for the community that is not focused on Israel. Programs have been successful when one or two Americans and one or two Israelis worked together on a program. In order to succeed, the Israel Education curriculum needs partnerships that are not forced and buy-in from the counselors as well. In addition, there needs to be a person to oversee and guide these collaborations. Lastly, the ED described an amazing trip to Israel with all of the URJ Camp Educators. It was a time for collaborations and to share best practices. While there were many creative and visionary programs in Israel, these practices were not well implemented into the summer programs.

The last Camp Director I interviewed from Camp F represents a fairly new camp in the early stages of curricular development in the realm of Israel Education. This camp tries to connect its campers to Judaism through high levels of sports activities. Sixty percent of their campers, as of last year, would not have attended a Jewish summer camp if this Jewish

sports camp did not exist. The Camp Director said that the *schlichim* are incredible and work well with the American staff, but they are still trying to figure out how to make the connection to Israel at a Sports Camp stronger (Anonymous, personal communication, October 28, 2011).

No two camps teach Israel in the same way. While all of these camps infuse Israel into their curriculum, it is clear that there is not one cohesive structure for Israel Education throughout the Movement.

“How is success measured at your camp?”

Measuring the success of Israel education at Jewish summer camps is a very difficult endeavor. When I asked this question of the people I interviewed, each one gave me a different answer. Some educators and directors said they could measure success by whether or not the campers are excited and talk about Israel. Others said they can measure success based on how many kids go to Israel on a NFTY in Israel program or spend a semester in high school on Eisendrath International Exchange (EIE). While each person whom I interviewed had a different answer to his question, there was a general consensus that there is no one specific way to determine if the Israel Education programs at their camps are successful. While most of the camps would like to think they are successful, the majority also said that there is room for improvement. The Assistant Director from Camp A summarized this question nicely, “What we are doing is good, we can always do better” (Anonymous, personal communication, September 15, 2011). The Director of Camp F cannot evaluate its success yet because after only three years in existence, they have a long way to go. The Assistant Director of Camp B said, “Our goal is to make them so excited and curious about Israel, that they will definitely travel to Israel. Our job at camp is to wet their

appetite and make them want to go” (Anonymous, personal communication, October 24, 2011).

“What is the future of Israel Education at your camp?”

I appreciated what the Assistant Director of Camp A said when I asked where they thought Israel Education was going at their camp. “I would like to see it continue on the path of engaging kids in relationships. I want every kid to feel like they know someone in Israel; they know me and don’t lose touch...the history is of course important, but also have that contemporary sense as well. It is not just a political relationship, but something deeper. All kids should feel like we are all *Am Yisrael* (the nation of Israel)” (Anonymous, personal communication, September 15, 2011).

Conclusions

Reform Judaism faces different pressures than other, more traditional denominations of modern Judaism. Unlike Orthodox Judaism, and to a far lesser extent, Conservative Judaism, Reform Judaism is unable to rely on strict adherence to traditions to create a cohesive community. Spanning ideologies that range from highly traditional to nearly secular, Reform Judaism has a broad appeal, but also finds itself on the front line of assimilation and Americanization. Rather than fearing a complete assimilation into American society, Reform Jews attempt to embrace the shift in religious lifestyle and incorporate it into a modern Jewish lifestyle. It is in this context that the microcosm of Reform camping becomes most important. While Judaism may be a supplementary influence in the life of a child, camp serves to create a unity of purpose and message. With this as a background, camp can be viewed as a “make or break” determinative step in the formation of young Reform Jewish identities. In addition to their Reform Jewish identities,

camp can serve as a crucial place where young Jews develop their opinions about and relationships with Israel. It was this angle that I chose to explore through this research.

As the result of my research, I have concluded that it is crucial to integrate Israel education into all aspects of camp. Many of the Directors, Assistant/Associate Directors and Educators I interviewed alluded to this as a goal in their camps. Many have succeeded in some aspects of integration, but it can be stronger. Rather than one day set aside during the summer as *Yom Yisrael*, engagement with Israel should be an ongoing aspect of camp that is present on the soccer field, during meals, *t'fillot* (worship), and in the lake. Israel should be a part of the daily conversations. Israel should not be put on the sidelines until the *Mishlach* is assigned programs to bring it in.

While I was interviewing the Associate Director and ED of Camp E, I noticed what seemed to be a lack of collaboration between the American staff and the *Mishlach*. With a cohesive staff that is able and willing to dialogue and work together, the Israel Education programs have the potential to thrive. This type of collaborative effort in all the camps would enhance all their programs, not just the ones relating to Israel.

Ideally, more time and resources would have allowed me to expand my research field to include interviews with members of the *Mishlach*, counselors and campers from all of these different camps and compare their responses with those of the administration. This would have provided a more complete picture of the way Israel education is implemented and experienced.

While there is always room for improvement, there are a plethora of things these camps do extremely well and make them unique. An example of this is when members of the *mishlach* from Camp A spend the weekend before camp starts with camp families.

Additionally, at Camp D, one of the reasons their education program is so strong is because members of the faculty spend the year creating the curriculum together. Education is a place where members of the camp staff and faculty can collaborate and enhance their programs and curricula. Camps have access to so many incredible resources, including an entire *mishlachat* of Israelis who would be eager to fill their campers' minds with information about Israel. It is crucial to the success of the programs that the Israelis are trained and integrated into the staff.

There is a larger question that all URJ Camps need to address and discuss together. What does teaching Israel mean at a URJ Camp? What does the URJ want its campers to know and feel about Israel when they leave camp? How do they assess what their campers are taking away? It is vital that these questions be addressed not only on an individual camp basis, but also by the camping system as a whole. Even though the implementation will look different in each camp, it is important that every camp follows the same mission and vision regarding Israel Education if they are all under the umbrella of the URJ.

A shared mission and vision would support the creation of an overarching curriculum by American and Israeli staff members working together. Counselors and staff play an important role in the campers' life and have the opportunity to educate them about Israel in a way that once-a-week *shiur* (lesson) cannot. One key way to address this missing piece of a campers' Jewish experience is to educate the staff on the evolving relationship the Reform Movement has to the State of Israel. If they truly understand the foundation of this relationship and where we stand now, they will be better equipped to teach Israel to their campers and integrate Israel throughout the day. Additionally, a complementary

study of campers' experience could shed light on the way the camps' education mission and vision are implemented.

Additionally, it was a creative idea to take all of the URJ Educators to Israel and create a seminar together to collaborate and share practices. However, it is crucial that these collaborations do not just happen with the educators and do not only happen in Israel. There is an incredible opportunity to bring these discussions back to the United States and have a seminar with not only the educators, but also the counselors and staff who implement these programs all summer.

While this study was only a glimpse into Israel education at URJ summer camps, it shows that forming relationships with Israel is a priority of the Reform Movement. These camps all do Israel education in different ways but the very idea that Israel is present in all these camps reflects the important role that Israel plays in the Reform Judaism. If we want the next generation of Jewish adults to be learned and passionate about the State of Israel, the best way to begin is at summer camp.

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